

Mary Byers Smith Historical Summary

Mary Byers Smith Historical Summary - 4 practical takeaway points:

1. There are no conflicts with the boundary line and the cemetery, no headstones are directly abutting. There is a gap in the boundary rocks, but it isn't an issue that can't be resolved or left be.
2. I believe Mary would approve of this mutually beneficial business transaction for affordable housing between the established ACT and Habitat for Humanity agencies and South Church also receiving a discounted and appropriate cash value of this land asset to use for our future endeavors.
3. This land shows no history of ever having a permanent structure on it! Working with our neighbors for their opinions is proving to be valuable. Conversations are ongoing, mostly positive, but with more contact and inclusion planned. Though the land is NOT part of the Historic Mill District, it is across the street, this proposal is being observed by many parties in Town for the process of it, as this development compliments other planning and cooperative efforts.
4. Our 7.4 acres of church property was acquired via seven parcels of land all donated, some stating "For the betterment of the Parish." Advancing this as a legacy of giving back to our community, it is also very fitting that we are not selling the land at top dollar for any commercial use, but selling at a discount "For the betterment of Andover."

For owners of a rare undeveloped parcel of land in Andover, we have a rare and tremendous service opportunity literally in our own back yard. I believe this fits historically both in honoring the legacy of Miss Smith and her family, and also with South Church again being faithful to the needs of our community.

*Respectfully submitted,
Charlotte Lyons*

Full Presentation: Delivered by Char Lyons on March 12, 2017

Today I want to cover 2 topics regarding this proposal, Who was Mary and her family and how did we acquire this land, and what is the history of this parcel of land.

The parcel in discussion is here, 1.06 acres abutting the cemetery with Lupine Rd. frontage, and is one of 7 parcels which we own making up 7.4 acres.

Who Was Mary Byers Smith?

Mary Byers Smith (1885-1983) donated a parcel of land along Lupine Road abutting our cemetery to South Church In Andover in 1938.

She was the granddaughter of John and Abigail Smith, he was a co-founder of Smith and Dove Flax Mills in Abbot Village, located at present day Dundee Park.

Mary was the second youngest of nine children of Joseph Warren and Fannie Smart Donald Smith, and grew up in the large white house kitty corner to the church on the corner of School and Central Sts.

She was a graduate of the Abbot Female Academy, and one of 3 in her class to go to college.

Mary graduated from Smith College, opened a bookstore in Northampton and ran it with other women. She was ahead of her time in giving employment opportunities to women other than teaching.

She came back to Andover to care for her parents, and by this time, her aunts and uncles and cousins and brothers and sisters had moved away, died, weren't involved etc., and she inherited a great deal of land.

- This parcel came to her via an aunt and uncle.

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Mary was a legacy of her benevolent mill owner family who had built:

- Housing for their workers,
- A village hall for Abbot Village,
- Recreational facilities,
- Established a pension fund,
- Funded the Alms House
- and the family founded Memorial Hall Library.

Mary never married and was a leader in social services in Andover and worked for many State Boards of education and social services.

She served as the first woman elected to the Andover School Committee.

Mary was a lifelong member of Free Christian Church, and wrote a history of their founding.

She is buried with her family in the West Parish Garden Cemetery. They were founding members of both West Parish and Free Christian churches.

In fitting with the character and legacy of her family, we believe Miss Smith would approve of the use of the land for affordable housing.

The donation of this parcel was a business transaction with benefits for both parties.

Mary was paying taxes on this little piece of land, and on several odd parcels left over from the Smith and Dove Mill and Abbott Village properties that she inherited, which she either sold or donated around this same time.

She was unmarried, and probably in need of tax relief, income, and financial opportunities to continue her charitable work.

Giving it to South Church made sense on two accounts.

Firstly, it was the most logical place for future cemetery expansion.

She did actually own the parcel that became Old South Lane, but breaking that up probably wasn't worth it to her.

By the way, she lived in the John Abbot house that the Cutts lived in for years, just down the street.

Secondly, and this is important, when the Scottish immigrants in Abbott Village lost a family member, they routinely came up the hill and asked for burial space for their loved one in our cemetery.

*Many, Many, Many families with old plots offered space.
Some families were able to put up headstones, most not.*

Linda Zimmerman's grandmother buried two babies here in unmarked graves.

This is what's important:

I'm sure there was some appreciation from Mary for that generosity in her giving and not selling us the land.

I think she would be very receptive to this proposal. Not only would she agree to the use for affordable housing, but with us SELLING the land at a discount which sets us up for other financial endeavors, whatever they may be.

I firmly believe she would appreciate this business transaction with benefits for both parties.

Personally, I love that we are able to approach this transaction as literally doing missions in our backyard, and the money is a bonus.

I really think Mary would think that same way, she was doing something for us, and the money she saved in taxes was a bonus.

So that is some history on who she was, who her family was, and our relationship.

Let me briefly tell you what I know of the history of the parcel of our property

Miss Smith donated this parcel in 1938 with no stipulations in the deed for its use, nor are there any indications of how South Church planned for its use, but most likely as an opportunity to expand the cemetery.

In looking at various maps of Andover, it appears nothing was ever built on this lot.

Being that it had abutted the depot and train tracks and the cemetery, this was likely a materials area for the mills, maybe it was a pasture for animal grazing and rearing as its pretty flat. No permanent structure is on any map.

Before the Smith and Dove mills, the Ballards had owned 20 acres of river land down to Ballardvale, as original land owners.

The land stayed in their family 150 years as they milled the Shawsheen River since the 1650s.

It was miller Joseph Ballard who unknowingly brought the Andover wave of witch hysteria in 1692.

I want to find out how this parcel was acquired by the Parish in 1709, as a title search done in 2001 found nothing but that the Ballards had the land in the 1650s.

I am on this!

So since 1938, we have never done anything with this land but cut the grass.

Long time member Barbara Moody said that over the decades talk arose about expanding the cemetery, but there was always something else happening, and what if stuff.

Then, fewer and fewer people were even interested in burying here. They literally had died off.

In 1999, the Trustees wanted to address this asset, but realized we didn't even have a grasp on who was in the cemetery proper, let alone was there a need to expand.

That plus the increased interest nationally in using the internet to do genealogy and the church office getting increased requests for information and realizing that we couldn't read many of the eroded headstones to figure this out, the Trustees launched a project to record the info on each stone and just who was buried out back, what areas are still open, etc., and put it out there.

Enter me, and the rest is HISTORY! This led to the Trustees determining that we did not need or want to expand the cemetery.

We realized we are not a full service cemetery, we are a steward of an historic burial yard that still sells lots, but determined it would only for cremains.

The last people with a full casket burial were the Demoores as they bought their plot in the '60s, and we honored that.

So, we should actually be glad that this area was never developed, as we have a parcel lot of land in Andover where the opportunity for affordable housing land is puny.

Also, Andover recently voted in mixed use zoning of an historic mill area, which this parcel abuts across the street.

Elaine Clements of the Historical Society and I knocked this about a bit and we see this as fitting for honoring this gift from the Smiths, and Mary specifically, and it fits with the opportunity to advance the Historic Mill District area now with other new development.

This committee has spoken to neighbors who are mostly on board, and very appreciative that someone came to ask their opinion, and would welcome new neighbors. Continued talks and inclusion with them is proving to be valuable both for criticism and for getting them vested as well.

On a practical level, these neighbors will likely open their parking lots and restroom use to the volunteers, and those relationships can go so far.

So to wrap up, I believe we are paying forward the legacy of Mary Byers Smith and we are able to put the proceeds toward other endeavors just like she did.

The Trustees will be holding a meeting to build some consensus on how to proceed with the proceeds so that doesn't hang us up in the vote.

I believe we have a mutually beneficial business transaction here with ACT and Habitat that gives them Andover land at a discount, we are not the builders or landlords, we have tremendous service opportunity literally in our backyard, and we benefit financially where we not trying to solve a budget problem.

The opportunity to give back to the community which gave us all 7 parcels of this land, and look at what those benefits brought to this institution, this is a very complimentary proposal. And it is filling the void of those benevolent mill owners who were the pillars of the community.

We are a pillar, let's get out there.